

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Heart of the Rockies Initiative, working on behalf of the land trusts in Montana and in cooperation with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks was awarded a grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Wildlife Opportunities Fund to develop a coordinated delivery mechanism for the habitat conservation and restoration components of Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CFWCS). This project proposed to build upon the CFWCS by reaching out and involving the individuals who administer key local, state, federal and nonprofit programs. The intent is to (1) better leverage those programs to achieve the habitat goals of the CFWCS; (2) identify unmet needs and opportunities for new programs and funding sources; and, (3) lay the groundwork for coalitions and individual organizations that will advocate for new programs and funding in the public policy arena. The project report summarizes conversations with XXX number of people, representing XXX different conservation programs administered by state, federal and tribal governments and non-governmental organizations.

A new approach to natural resource conservation is emerging in Montana. The new model reflects a transition from individual species management toward concern for species groups and conservation and restoration of habitats necessary to support those groups; a greater emphasis on sustaining the communities of people who depend on working landscapes as well as sustaining ecological systems; conservation as a result of local initiatives and partnerships; a more strategic approach, based on species and habitat objectives, in response to long term threats to conservation; and, a transition from conflict to a recognition that success requires cooperation.

Conservation partnerships already are happening in Montana and much of it has occurred without specific direction from either CFWCS or, in many instances, government. Examples include The Blackfoot Challenge; the work of several watershed groups, generally; the Montana Wetlands Legacy; the Joint Ventures; fish and wildlife mitigation, pursuant to the Columbia River Fish and Wildlife Program; the work of the various land trusts; and, the USFWS Partners with Fish and Wildlife program. There are opportunities to learn from these programs and opportunities to build upon these successes. Generally, successful local groups formed around inspired leadership, formed around the common ground and engaged all of the relevant players, including integration of landowners.

Generally, the CFWCS goals and objectives overlap with the conservation goals and objectives of other state and federal agencies and with Montana-based NGO's. This is not necessarily a blanket endorsement of CFWCS. But, there is general recognition that CFWCS is a good start to defining a shared conservation vision for Montana. Components of that shared vision include the understanding that:

- Montana is a special place and we have a responsibility to conserve it.
- Sustainable communities and sustainable ecosystems are interdependent. Working landscapes are important to our culture and important to maintaining open space.
- Implementation should be community based, with an emphasis on getting work done on the ground.
- To be successful, conservation will require people with multiple interests working together to achieve shared objectives.
- Effective communication must enfranchise people at the community level.

- The conversation about conservation in Montana must move from a debate to a dialogue.
- There is a need for state level leadership. Effective leadership must be facilitative and supportive of local initiative, i.e. “leading from behind”. It cannot be directive.
- Many Montana landscapes are intact. Protection of intact landscapes is less expensive than restoration.
- Lack of adequate funding is an important obstacle to achieving the CFWCS objectives through conservation partnerships.

There are several challenges to achieving the goals and objectives defined by the CFWCS. Land uses and land values in Montana are changing as traditional working landscapes are converted to subdivisions. These changes often are occurring without sufficient forethought and in an environment that resists land use planning and regulation. There also is potential for land use that might conflict with traditional Montana values. Water is a critical issue and there are concerns related to stream degradation; dewatering; non-point source pollution; and, the proximity of development to streams. There is potential for conflict between energy development and the habitat requirements of sensitive species. All of these threats are occurring when there is broader concern for the consequences of climate change.

CFWCS offers an approach to think strategically in response to threats to conservation and to prioritize protection of important habitats. However, there is general agreement that inadequate funding is a challenge to achieving the goals and objectives outlined by CFWCS.

Effective communication is essential to developing a shared conservation vision and to the formation of functional conservation collaborations.

This project identified several obstacles to conservation partnerships. However, the project also demonstrated that there is general agreement about the factors that are essential to make conservation partnerships successful. Specific factors include:

- A Statewide conservation vision that embraces local priorities and initiatives;
- A conservation vision developed around principles of sustainability; the integration of ecological integrity, economic feasibility and social acceptance; and the interdependence of sustainable ecosystems and sustainable communities that depend on those ecosystems.
- A multi-disciplinary approach
- Leadership that is perceived as objective, reliable and committed;
- An identified champion for CFWCS, a person who is determined to get conservation done;
- Visible support for CFWCS from the Governor’s office and the Natural Resources Sub-cabinet;
- Alignment within FWP and a commitment to integrate CFWCS into all department programs;
- Allocation of FWP staff time according to priorities defined by CFWCS;
- Shared vision among FWP, DNRC and DEQ and a commitment to landscape level conservation;
- FWP fully engaged with the partners and SWG fully integrated with the partner’s programs;

- Effective integration of CFWCS into federal land management planning; models of agencies using CFWCS and using CFWCS for the right reason;
- Frequent and thorough communication among the partners;
- A better understanding of the respective strengths of the partners;
- Inclusiveness; and,
- A broad base of public support for landscape level conservation, including local buy in.

The report identifies gaps between what is required to achieve the goals defined by CFWCS and current resources that might be used for that purpose. The report identifies potential actions to implement a coordinated delivery mechanism for the habitat components of Montana's CFWCS, as suggested by persons who participated in interviews. The report also summarizes those programs as potential partners in the achievement of goals and objectives defined by the CFWCS.